Digital content marketing as a catalyst for e-WOM

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Short Abstract:
Applying the theory of Use and Gratification this paper investigates how the social impact of digital content marketing on food tourism leads to e-WOM. This paper explores digital content marketing can generate social impact, and then lead to e-WOM. A sample of 707 Chinese tourists completed an online survey. The collected data were analysed applying structural equation modelling. This study found that there exist positive associations with between content information and informational social impact, as well as between self-expression and normative social impact on tourists in food tourism. Social interaction positively associates with both normative social impact and informational social impact. Both normative and informational social impact have a positive effect on e-WOM for food tourism. Social impact has positive mediating effect between digital content marketing and e-WOM. This study provides a theoretical basis for digital content marketing, literature support for social impact theory and stimulates research development of e-WOM.

Keywords: Digital content marketing, E-WOM, Social impact.
Introduction and Research Aim
As part of modern lifestyle, food tourism is increasingly becoming a priority for tourists (Okumus, Koseoglu, & Ma, 2018). With the rapid development of the Internet, ever more people prefer the use of mobile social media (Lamsfus et al., 2015). Such changes have prompted marketers to consider online marketing as a way of reaching their target audience (Sitta, Faulkner & Stern, 2018). As an essential means of digital marketing, digital content marketing has attracted wide attention in recent years. Digital content marketing is a new online marketing strategy, which emphasises that the content should be of high quality, meet consumers' demand for information and increase consumers' cognition of brands (Hollebeek & Macky, 2019). Digital content marketing is more focused on communication with target consumers rather than the ultimate goal of sales. Digital content marketing aims to reduce product sales information as much as possible, and instead, deliver more information that is conducive to consumers' understanding and cognition of the brand, to strengthen the emotional connection with customers (Hollebeek & Macky, 2019). Digital content marketing seeks to maintain a long-term relationship with consumers and spread WOM rather than short-term purchase growth.

The aim of this study is:
To reveal the relationship between digital content marketing in food tourism and electronic word-of-mouth communication by social impact mediation effect.

We address a research question in line with this aim:
RQ: How does digital content marketing via mobile social media lead to electronic word-of-mouth effects on Chinese tourists' decision-making in food tourism?

Background and/or Conceptual Model
Given that this study involves digital content marketing via mobile social media, social impact and e-WOM communication, the theory of this study needs to be determined according to these three aspects. Currently, in the social media studies, the dominant theories include “Use and Gratification”, “Social Identity Theory”, “Social Capital Theory”, “Social Exchange Theory” and “Social Network Theory” (Ngai, Tao & Moon, 2015). From the perspective of tourists, this study adopts the "Use and Gratification Theory" as the application theory of digital content marketing on social media. The four dimensions of the "use and gratification theory" refer to information, entertainment, social interaction and self-expression, which will be adopted as the dimensions of digital content marketing in this study (Plume & Slade, 2018).

Latane (1981) established the social impact theory, which can be divided into normative social impact and informational social impact (Kwahk & Kim; 2017). Recently, some research has found that some users of social media tend to follow group opinions because they consider they constitute an acceptable norm (Li & Sakamoto, 2014). When the users of social media can estimate their similarity with the content sender, the group opinions are more active on social media (Yang et al., 2015). Therefore, this research will use the normative and informational social impact to study tourists affected by the feelings, attitudes and behaviour of other key players. The theoretical model is shown in Figure 1.

Methodology
To measure the availability of valid scales with the defined structure, a survey was utilised. All data were collected online from Chinese tourists who like food and travel and are mobile social media users, and who had or planned to travel for food. All the data were distributed through social media in the form of an electronic questionnaire for one month. A total of 707
valid responses were obtained. In this study, software SPSS 25.0 for exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was used to test the reliability and validity of measurements. The convergent validity and discriminant validity of the structural model were tested by confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) through applying software AMOS 24.0. The structural equation model (SEM) was used to verify the theoretical framework. Covariance matrices were used for all analyses.

Results and/or Discussion and Contributions
This study finds that content information has a positive effect on informational social impact on tourists in food tourism; self-expression has a positive effect on normative social impact on tourists in food tourism; social interaction has a positive association with both normative social impact and informational social impact. Both normative social impact and informational social impact have a positive effect on e-WOM for food tourism. Either normative social impact or informational social impact has a mediation effect between content information and e-WOM, and social interaction and e-WOM. Normative social impact has a positive mediation between self-expression and e-WOM (Yap, Soetarto & Sweeney, 2013), while informational social impact has a positive mediation between content entertainment and e-WOM. Therefore, digital content marketing can generate social impact, and this social impact can lead to e-WOM. The results are shown in Figure 1.

Implications for Theory and Practice
In this study, the theoretical significance is to establish an empirical model of "digital content marketing—social impact—e-WOM communication", especially the social impact theory as a mediating variable, which expands the theoretical research on digital content marketing and clarifies the important role of mobile social media content marketing. This study not only provides a theoretical basis for digital content marketing, but also provides literature support for social impact theory and stimulates research development of e-WOM. From the management and practical perspective, this research suggests tourism marketers should focus more on valuable content, subtly producing informative, entertaining and emotional content that has a social impact, thereby inspiring positive e-WOM (Nguyen & Romaniuk, 2014), and thus influencing travellers’ food tourism decisions (Huang, 2012). This paper also suggests that marketers or managers engaged in the tourism or hospitality industry ought to pay attention to social interaction with the target audience, concentrate on the quality of information content, and achieve self-expression of the target audience (Hur et al., 2017).

Figure 1 Model with results

Note: Standardised path coefficient significant at †p < .10, * p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p< .001
NS= no significant
Source from Bouncken et al., (2015) and Hair et al., (2014)
References


